

**Like a Tree Planted by Water
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
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Text: Jeremiah 17:5-10**

In the side yard of the church facing Fairmount Boulevard stands a massive oak tree. Tall and majestic, Karl Bruch (who also fits that description) told me it is even older than he, probably two hundred years old. Imagine what that old oak has witnessed in two centuries: the generations of people who have come and gone, the development and transformation of a neighborhood—the home that is now the manse was built only one year after the church's founding. By then the tree was already a centenarian. When we gaze at this magnificent tree, we are, of course seeing about half the total organism. One-half is hidden below ground—its strong and intricate root system. Whatever threats to its survival---from automobile exhaust and the laying of underground cables and water systems, to pests and various building programs—all these have been weathered. Through every storm, every season it has stood, gifting us with sheltering shade in summer, a breathtaking vision of fire in Fall, and a filigreed sentinel (not to mention a football goal line) in winter.

The poet claimed only God could make a tree, and surely this tree is a silent sign of God's grace to us! We have words to describe this gift in Scripture, both in the Psalms and in the book of the prophet Jeremiah. In each instance, trees are used as a metaphor for the life of faith, sustained by roots extended towards a stream, drawing up the life-giving water needed to thrive. As we hear the reading, let your mind's eye see it...as we consider the roots that ground and nourish our faith and life in the world. A reading from the Hebrew Scriptures, the prophet Jeremiah, in the seventeenth chapter at the 5th verse; listen for God's Word. [Jeremiah 17:5-10]

There is almost no vacation I like better than a good road trip. Maybe it was all those family vacations, crammed into whatever Buick we owned at the time, setting off for the Grand Canyon or Washington DC. Now there are two distinct philosophies about road trips, and in my family both were represented. One—championed by my father—was to pick the most direct route and get to one’s destination as quickly as possible. The other—endorsed by my mother—was to make the trip itself part of the vacation. That means you take your time; get off the interstate to visit that little museum; stop for a picnic lunch at a park; and by all means read and comment on every historical marker you encounter along the way. My siblings and I would always speculate as to which parent’s perspective would prevail, and may explain why to this day my very favorite bumper-sticker asks that all-important question: Are we having fun yet?

In my adult life, I might have adopted my father’s philosophy had it not been for many trips driven between Iowa City and Denver with child in car seat. You just can’t explain “driving straight through” to a 4-year old! As far as scenery goes, the 438 miles of Nebraska from Interstate 80 have never made my top-10 list. In fact, at the risk of offending any cornhuskers present, Nebraska has always seemed interminably dull—mile after mile after mile of unvaryingly rolling plain. Until one trip when in sheer desperation, I stopped to let Paul stretch his legs at a roadside historical marker. And there it was: information about the Ogallala Aquifer, the largest body of water in the northern hemisphere—larger than any of the Great Lakes—underneath boring old Nebraska. The Ogallala Aquifer provides an almost unlimited supply of water for the entire Midwest, nourishing crops and vegetation, as far away as....the colorful, scenic state of Colorado! Lying complete underground, Ogallala Aquifer is an unseen but transforming presence in an otherwise unpromising landscape.

I wonder if many of us travel our life's journey on the surface of Nebraska, without ever connecting to the abundant, life-giving Source, hidden but more real than all that meets the eye. Jeremiah suggests that we have a choice between what we can see and what we can't see; between trust in human enterprise, or trust in God; between the kingdom of the world, and God's kingdom; between death or life. It's the difference between a desert shrub, parched and gasping to survive, and a tree planted by water, sending out roots by the stream, unafraid when heat comes or drought threatens, continuing to bear fruit.

Jeremiah knew from personal experience what he was talking about it. He struggled with his call to proclaim God's Word in a particularly difficult time in Israel's history, and in fact, never really witnessed the vindication of his life's work. But he dug in and his roots went deep and deeper, and in the times of drought, when he was persecuted and beset by controversy, his leaves remained green. Jeremiah persisted for the long haul. And he was able to do so because he planted his spiritual roots where they would find renewal and refreshment, near to God. *[for this summary of Jeremiah's prophetic ministry, I am indebted to my colleague in ministry, the Rev. J. Stuart Taylor]*

Consider our own lives. We have all known seasons of drought, or what activist Dorothy Day called the "long loneliness." It might come through the loss of employment, or the loss of health. It might be triggered by turmoil in marriage or strains in family and friendships. It might simply result from weariness in trying to keep up with the pace of life. Global conditions—war, poverty, terrorism, disease, environmental threats—seem overwhelming and resistant to real change. We become thirsty and restless, anxious and unfocused. We try many ways and means to slake this thirst and calm our restlessness. There are all the usual suspects: alcohol, drugs, material things, work, work, and work. Some of these may even keep us going for awhile.

When everything is sailing along smoothly, we can make it through Nebraska, surviving on the illusion of our autonomy and self-sufficiency. But when the drought comes, in the form of a crisis or just the gradual erosion of illusion, we will stall; we will fall; we will miss the beauty and joy of lives rooted in the streams of water from God.

The one who trusts in the Lord is like a tree planted by water. Jeremiah presents this wisdom as a vivid contrast between two ways of life. Blessed are those who choose a life of trust in God. Yes. But Jeremiah also describes a life oriented inward upon the self as accursed; not unlike toasting life with a glass of salt-saturated water. We heard a similar contrast in the gospel reading, in which Jesus pronounces blessing upon those who entrust themselves to the providential care of God—and woe to those who stake their lives on themselves, their power, their fortune, their material goods. Friends, the question of what is central, of who or what lies at the center of our lives seems to be THE essential question. How we answer it determines our choices and the way we will journey. There is much we don't have control over; time and tide will bring us 10,000 joys and as many sorrows. But on this matter we do have a choice. We can decide whether to root ourselves in ourselves, or in something larger than ourselves. Jeremiah and Jesus more than suggest that the purpose of life is greater than self-fulfillment, and offer an alternative. Go deeper than the surface and superficial things, seek out the everflowing streams of water that will grow life in us.

This past week, elder Susan Bookshar and I participated in a spirituality conference that explored faith practices to nourish this unseen side of life. We were reminded that the life of faith is one life. Faith is formed in us both through worship and ministry; personally and together, as a congregation. Some members will draw closer to God primarily through prayer or personal meditation; others will strengthen their sense of God's presence and power through the experience of music—whether the transcendent sounds of classical organ and choir, or the rockin' rhythms of drums and guitar at New Vision;

some will find their leafy branches renewed through outreach and service. These different ministries are not in competition with each other; they are varied parts of a single mission, the high calling of God to be Christ's body in this place and time. The church must root all its ministries—worship and education and fellowship and outreach—in something deeper than itself, in the love of God we know through Jesus Christ. How can we deepen our taproot?

The African-American theologian Howard Thurman tells about a time when he was a student in Rochester, New York. Late one night he was returning to campus by way of Main Street, the central artery of traffic in the city. The streets were practically deserted, and as he walked along, he became aware of what seemed to be the sound of rushing water. He realized he'd been hearing this rumbling for quite some times but had only that moment become aware of it. The next day he was talking with one of his professors who told him that under part of the main street lay a section of the old Erie Canal. This was the sound of water he had heard. The sound itself was continuous, but the normal daytime traffic drowned it out. Only when the surface noises stopped did the sound become audible. This experience became a living metaphor for what Thurman called "centering down," a necessary condition for the cultivation of strong roots that will help us thrive, individually and as the body of Christ known as Fairmount Presbyterian Church.

Ah, but there it is again: the surface noise; the Nebraska landscape; our full calendars and busy, important lives. I believe a variety of spiritual practices can help us tap into divine power and wisdom for living mindfully, soulfully, joyfully. We all need to make time for Bible study, for rooting the story of our lives in the sacred story of God's people. Prayer and meditation, yoga and silence, sharing our faith journeys, taking time for conversation and communion with others, will also nurture our spirits. Next Sunday we will introduce a new yet ancient way of discovering God's presence and guidance in our lives through walking a labyrinth. For

almost all of us, we have to begin by slowing down. Taking some deep breaths, and stopping our ceaseless activity, the feeling we have to do more, *be* more. We must center down. *Be still and know that I am God.*

I was surprised to learn that the word religion has the same root as the word ligament; both derived from a base meaning "connection." The invisible but powerful bonds between us and God—and among us as a community--- hold us together, and help us live and move grace-fully. Like a tree, planted by water, roots deep and intertwined, sustained through every season.

TO THE GOD OF ALL GRACE, WHO CALLS US TO SHARE GOD'S ETERNAL GLORY IN UNION WITH CHRIST, BE THE POWER FOREVER. AMEN.

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